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FM AMCONSUL MUMBAI
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INFO RUCNCLS/ALL SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 8670
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 2113
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RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 2671
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC
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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MUMBAI 000369

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV PHUM KIRF IN
SUBJECT: SHIV SENA-BJP TRY TO STOKE COMMUNAL VIOLENCE AHEAD OF
MAHARASHTRA ELECTIONS

REF: A. MUMBAI 170
     ¶B. MUMBAI 130
     ¶C. MUMBAI 364
     ¶D. 2008 MUMBAI 234

MUMBAI 00000369  001.2 OF 002


¶1. (U) SUMMARY:  The three major cities of Sangli, Miraj and
Kolhapur in southern Maharashtra experienced Hindu Muslim
communal violence for six days in early September during the
final phases of the Hindu festival of Ganpati.  Sangli and Miraj
remained under curfew for most of these six days.  Though the
state Congress Party-led coalition government stepped in quickly
to quell the violence, one person was killed on September 7.
The politically motivated violence was stoked by opportunistic
elements of the Bharatiya Janata Party-Shiv Sena opposition
coalition who are trying to polarize voters before the upcoming
state elections in October.  End summary.



¶2. (U) Beginning on September 3, Hindu activists provoked a
number of Hindu-Muslim clashes in several large cities in
southern Maharashtra.  The communal violence started in Miraj on
September 3, Anant Chaturdashi day, which is the final day of
the Hindu festival of Ganpati, when the Ganesha idols are
immersed in water.  During the idol procession, the Hindu
nationalist Shiv Sena political party raised an arch depicting
the fabled murder of Mughal warrior Afzul Khan by Maharashtrian
Hindu hero Chatrapati Shivaji along the route.  This provocation
led to a violent clash between Hindu and Muslim groups which
continued over the weekend, resulting in the death of one person
in Kolhapur on September 7.  The electronic media did not show
inflammatory video footage of the riots, as had been the case
with past incidents.  However, individuals posted YouTube videos
of street battles between police and Hindu activists, and
between Hindu and Muslim activists, helping the violence to
spread to surrounding villages.  Police imposed a curfew in the
cities of Sangli, Miraj and Ichalkaranji from September 3 to the
afternoon of September 8.  There were reported incidents of
stone-throwing and arson; the police arrested over 150
activists, and closed markets and public transportation.



¶3. (U) On September 7, on the orders of the Congress/Nationalist
Congress Party (NCP) coalition government in Maharashtra, Mumbai
police prevented Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) activists and the
party's national vice president, Gopinath Munde, from boarding a
flight to Kolhapur in the belief that his presence there would
incite further violence.  (Note:  The Shiv Sena and the BJP are
in a long-standing electoral alliance in the state.  End note.)
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The police forcibly turned back BJP activists who were trying to enter the departure terminal, and confiscated Munde's boarding pass. Several BJP leaders tried to reach Sangli by road, but Maharashtra police successfully stopped them at Pune, 100 miles south of Mumbai.

¶4. (U) On September 9, after a meeting involving the heads of all the major political parties in Mumbai, the curfew was relaxed in Sangli-Miraj for a few hours. The Ganesha festival organizers agreed to immerse the idols that they had kept back to protest arrest of Hindu rioters, and the Government too relented by releasing most of the detainees. Most electronic media reported that there were no clashes on September 9.

¶5. (SBU) Sangli is the home district of three important regional Congress and NCP leaders. Current home minister Jayant Patil of the Congress, former home minister R.R. Patil of the NCP and chief minister aspirant Patangrao Kadam of the Congress all hail from the district. Jayant Patil, who was visiting his constituency for the Ganesha festival, remained on site for five days. The Maharashtra chief of police himself rushed down from Mumbai and ensured that a major communal conflagration did not erupt. Home minister Jayant Patil and Dalit leader Ramdas Athavale went on record to accuse local Hindu organizations of deliberately using a well-known incident from Shivaji's life to offend Muslims. Though Shivaji is a symbol used more by the Shiv Sena than the BJP, the BJP, as the weaker and hungrier coalition partner, was quicker off the mark in trying to make political capital. Strong action by Maharashtrian government prevented the violence from spreading.

Comment: Enter Shivaji, the Dark Horse Candidate

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¶6. (SBU) The Shiv Sena and the BJP are at the beginning of their campaign for the state assembly in Maharashtra, one that will likely be highly competitive. Shivaji, the 17th century Maharashtrian warrior king, is a rich symbolic figure across the political spectrum in the state: the BJP-Sena coalition invokes him for his supposed pro-Hindu leanings, the Congress-NCP for his Maratha caste identity. In recent years, all of Maharashtra's political parties have done their part to honor his legacy for electoral mileage - the BJP-Shiv Sena government named a major train station and Mumbai airport after him, and the current Congress-NCP government plans to build a 300 foot statue of him astride his horse off Mumbai's coast, at the cost of USD 70 million.

¶7. (SBU) Maharashtra has long seen minor Hindu-Muslim skirmishes surrounding the end of the 10 day Ganesha festival. With the latest violent events occurring in southern Maharashtra (traditionally a Congress-NCP bastion), it is clear that the Shiv Sena and BJP are trying to divide the Hindu and Muslim communities, thereby giving the Hindu nationalist parties a better chance during the upcoming state elections. If the Sena and BJP manage to polarize Hindu voters in these districts - comprising 30 of the 288 state parliament seats - they will likely improve their chances in this hotly-contested state election. End Comment.
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